DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 757 CS 213 039

AUTHOR Stern, Caroline
TITLE Writing Portfolios: A Resource for Teaching and Assessment.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; Higher Education; *Portfolios (Background Materials); *Student Evaluation; Writing Assignments; *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Process Approach (Writing)

ABSTRACT

A writing portfolio provides material to use in evaluating not only students' finished products but also their persistence in developing and revising to a finished draft. Typically, portfolios contain the assignment sheet, brainstorming exercises, essay plan/outline, and first through final drafts of all writing. A table of contents sheet, listing everything that should be in the portfolio, helps students organize them. Portfolios may be checked and graded weekly against the table of contents sheet for completeness, organization, and neatness. This is not time-consuming when a check grading system is used, and helps students be better organized and more responsible for their writing. Students learn through the portfolio that writing is evolutionary and that good pre-writing is the foundation of good writing. Portfolios reveal the number of drafts students write, thus indicating the level of their willingness to learn. The portfolio provides the teacher with valuable evidence, including patterns of errors, in all stages of the process or product, and provides students with concrete evidence of their progress. Students learn to assess their own writing by doing a mid-term and an end-of-semester critique of an essay written the first day of class. They name the writing skills they have learned, and demonstrate their use of them with examples from more recent work in their portfolios. (SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Writing Portfolios: A Resource for Teaching and Assessment

By: Caroline Stern, Assistant Professor
Dept. of Languages & Literature
Ferris State University
Big Rapids, MI 49307

Work Phone: (616) 592-2917

ED336757

CS213039

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Caroline Stern

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Writing Portfolios: A Resource for Teaching and Assessment

By: Caroline Stern, Assistant Professor
Ferris State University,
Dept. of Languages & Literature
Big Rapids,MI 49307

It took a bolt of lightening to teach me how much my writing had improved in the last year. The surge protector on my home computer didn't keep the lightening strike from locking me out of my word processing files, but I didn't panic because I had paper back up copies of all my class handouts, exercises, and tests. But, while I had revised my computer files each time I taught a subject, my paper back up copies were over a year old. My computerized files were still fresh in my mind, so when I reviewed my old drafts, I could easily see how important my intermediate revisions were. Anyone who has ever studied the before and after photos that are so popular in beauty magazines can understand that contrast is a very effective mode of persuasion and instruction. It was my computer experience that brought home to me the value in measuring writing ability by evaluating not only the end product, but the revising and persistence it took to achieve a finished draft. I didn't value where I was as a writer until I understood how far I had come.

I wanted my basic writing students to understand the same lesson and

one way I was able to accomplish this was by changing from grading their single assignments to having them compile a writing portfolio that I could evaluate. I taught composition courses for basic writers who were working to achieve a twelfth grade level of competency in composition so they could qualify to enter college level classes. Since all of the students deficient in some area of writing ability, the program I taught in offered a writing intensive course which prepared the students for a two hour exit competency essay test that would measure their readiness for college level work. Each student's essay test was rated according to the methods and standards outlined in The Nature and Measurement of Competency in English edited by Charles R. Cooper (National Council of Teachers of English, 1981) and in Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging by Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (NCTE, 1971). Using this system, we were able to determine where our students had arrived in ability at the end of the semester, but we never had a measurement of the distance they had come to arrive at that ability level. Introducing a writing portfolio assessment gave us material to use to evaluate the students' finished products and also their persistence in developing and revising to that finished draft. The writing portfolio also allowed teachers, students, and administrators to see concrete evidence of the process and the product. It was helpful to measure the process because I was teaching developmental English to students with low grade points or test scores in English composition. I wanted to know how much impact the class had on all the students, not just the ones who achieved competency by the end of the semester. Using portfolio evaluation, I found I had students who had

made great progress even though they fell short of the exit competency level. I had always felt that this was the case, but the writing portfolios gave me evidence to prove it. The writing portfolios gave me the means to tract the development and process of their patterns of error and achievement as well as a final product to use to determine their readiness for college writing. I could also measure cognitive and affective learning by reviewing the work in each student's portfolio. This proved so valuable in my writing instruction that I began using writing portfolios in all of my composition classes.

PORTFOLIO GROUND RULES

Monitoring student progress is easily done using a portfolio since the collection of student pre-writing and writing samples provides a more complete picture of writing ability than any single assignment or test can. Physically, writing portfolios are simply a collection of each student's writing in a loose leaf, folder, or file. First, students must maintain and organize their own portfolios according to the teacher's guidelines. The students must understand that their portfolios must always be ready for review so they learn responsibility and the teacher can track students' progress and persistence in completing assignments by having available the complete body of writing that leads to the final draft rather than just the final product of the writing. Typically the writing portfolio would contain the assignment sheet, brainstorming exercises, essay plan/outline, and first through final drafts. While this practice is already followed in many classrooms, the portfolio takes it a step further by requiring students to keep all of their essays over a

[3]

period of time. Additionally, they must add to the portfolio all ungraded work such as journal writing or extra pre-writing they do for assignments along with revisions of their works in progress. They must take responsibility to select and edit writing samples on their own initiative and not just upon the teacher's request. Thus the teacher has resources for measuring the students' willingness to learn.

To facilitate tracking students' work, all assignments must be numbered and dated so both teacher and student can determine the order in which the writing was done and thus measure the evolution of the student's writing abilities. To help my students get organized, I periodically gave them a table of contents that listed everything that they should have in their portfolios. It wasn't until I gave them class time to organize their portfolios so I could collect them that I understood how many students had problems with writing because they could never hold on to their pre-writing notes in an organized way long enough to produce a finished draft. I was dismayed by the looks of panic as students fumbled to find missing brainstorming sheets or essay plans. I sent those students home and told them they had to create or "re-create" the missing pre-writing exercises and hand them in in their portfolio the next day. So even though those stages of writing hadn't been graded by me, the students understood they had value in helping them arrive at the finished product because I would not accept the finished draft without them.

It wasn't a shock to me that some students have more problems with the housekeeping than with the critical thinking it takes to produce good writing. And for some students, the portfolio taught them to be better

organized and more responsible for all the stages of writing rather than just the final draft. Their portfolios were supposed to be current with the assignment whether it was for graded or ungraded stages of the writing process. The importance of this was reinforced for the students when I asked them to pull out their portfolios and use their pre-writing to complete in class an essay that wasn't due until the next week. When I discovered that a good number of students spent half the class fumbling through their messy folders to locate the materials, I decided to help them by checking and grading their portfolios on a weekly basis against the table of contents sheet for completeness, organization and neatness. This wasn't time consuming for me because I used a check grading system instead of a letter grade.

A WINDOW ON THE PROCESS

Students learned through the portfolio that writing was evolutionary and that good pre-writing is the foundation of good writing. If assessment of writing does not recognize that, it is incomplete because it evaluates product and not process. The writing portfolios gave me a window into the students' willingness and flexibility in investing in that process. The students' portfolios provided concrete evidence of the stages that were missing or weak or misdirected.

Having the students included in the portfolio all of their pre-writing for a particular assignment demonstrates the level of their willingness to learn. I always review rough drafts, but when I collected

the portfolios, I discovered exactly how many drafts some students wrote. For some it was the minimum,one, and that explained some of their problems with writing; for others, there were multiple drafts and still they had problems with the finished product. By reviewing all stages of writing, I could determine more easily where the problem began. Was the student revising or simply recopying what he or she had written before? Were students able to generate enough ideas to develop a quality essay and were they able to identify and select the best ideas for development? Additionally this window into the process provided a vehicle to help reduce plagiarism.

All this paper shuffling may sound like more work for the teacher, but it wasn't because I was selective in which stage of the process I would be collecting or reviewing and whether an assignment was worth a letter or check grade. Giving a √ for satisfactory work, a - for unsatisfactory work, and a + for excellent work satisfied the students' need for teacher feedback and my need to keep the workload manageable. With some students I studied just the final draft while with others I could learn more by reviewing the pre-writing. The students also understood that I could collect the portfolios on short notice to measure their progress in staying current with the assignments deadlines. I treated much of this grading as I do journal reading; I did a quick review of the material and studied only the pre-writing that sent up "red flags." The students were motivated to have the work complete and organized because they knew they were responsible for working through and having evidence of every stage of the writing process. They also knew I could ask them at any time to pull a previous work from their portfolios and complete a rewrite in class.

The writing portfolio thus provided a variety of resources for assessment. I could measure a student's persistence in reaching a final essay. How much did the student invested in brainstorming? Did it show in the final draft? How many revisions did the student draft before the final essay was ready? What does that say about the student's willingness to learn and ability to learn? What portion of the writing process did the student give the most effort? What did that say about the student's perception of the importance of that stage and how did that perception relate to the quality of the finished product? Was a weak final draft the product of insufficient or misdirected brainstorming or a lack of understanding the assignment's guidelines or purpose? Since the portfolio required students to hand in all of their work on a final draft, I had the option to review and grade any stage of the process or product. The pre-writing notes in the portfolio gave me clues to the student's thinking. And the portfolio gave the students a vehicle to organized and present that paper trail to me.

CONCRETE EVIDENCE OF CHANGE

When I talked with students about their writing, I pulled the evidence to support my points from their own portfolios. I was not surprised to discover that there were patterns to their strengths and weaknesses as a writer because the portfolio provided me with previous essays and pre-writing exercises to test and prove my diagnosis.

More importantly, the portfolio provided the students with concrete evidence of their progress in writing. The writing portfolio would be incomplete if it didn't give students the teacher's response to their work over a period of time instead of just on isolated assignments. That was why midway through the semester I would collect the portfolio and spend time filling out an checklist and evaluation form which I returned to the students.

With all of the students I have, I can't always keep a mental inventory of each student's writing style. The portfolio provided me with prompts from my own grading on past assignments. I noted patterns of errors that each student was making and always set short term goals for correcting those errors. This didn't have to be complicated; for example, it was easy for me to read my comments on previous essays and determine from that, for instance, that a student persistently had poor paragraph development or maybe problems with comma splice errors. I would then write a note to the student to work on this specific problem since it was showing up as a pattern. Likewise, if the student corrected an error that he or she had persistently made in earlier essays, I would applaud the learning that had taken place.

For example, one of my students was discouraged because she had so many corrections on her papers. When I looked at the body of her work over the span of several essays, I discovered that she was repeating the same three mistakes. I spread her essays across my desk and showed her the evidence presented in her writing. She came to understand that by investing time in learning to correct these three errors, she could

eliminate making most of the mistakes that had plagued her in the past. Without the the writing portfolio, I would not have had the resources to early diagnosis the patterns of the errors nor the evidence to convince her to make the change in her writing. Plus, many students will not dedicate themselves to investing effort to correct an error if they feel the error is an isolated one. Likewise, other students perceive each correction as a separate error and are therefore overwhelmed by the enormity of their problem; using the writing por'folio, I can help students identify and understand the patterns of error and show them that they are closer to correctness than they may have at first believed. They need the physical evidence to motivate them.

LEARNING SELF ASSESSMENT

Assessment is also not complete unless students learn to self-assess. How else can they learn to write with confidence and success outside the classroom? The writing portfolio, since it includes writing samples over a period of time, provides a vehicle to accomplish this. Ideally the first writing in the portfolio should be the base line for measuring progress. My students write a short essay in the first days of class to create this base line essay. I intentionally leave this draft ungraded except to note in my grade book that it has been completed. I return it to the students and tell them to store it in their portfolios for future use. Midway through the semester I ask the students to take

that essay from their portfolios and write a self assessment of their strengths and weaknesses using that first day essay as evidence for their points. This gives them an awareness that they have made progress as a writer because they can always look at that essay with a fresh eye and see mistakes that they hadn't seen when they originally wrote it. It is concrete evidence of change, hopefully of their own improvement.

At this point I also ask students to grade their own essay and write a critique of the essay. They receive a critique sheet to prompt them to self assess by asking them questions . I ask them that first day essay shows them about the strengths they have developed as a writer? What have they learned since they wrote this first essay? What do they need to work on as a writer? I had students who could see from this first day essay that a few months ago they weren't writing complete sentences or organizing their paragraphs or giving adequate development to their ideas. Contrasting their writing then to what they saw it as now is a very persuasive method for convincing them that they are learning. Most gain confidence in their ability to learn and in the rewards of their persistence.

At the end of the semester they once again pull the first day essay from their portfolio with the mid term critique and I ask them to do another evaluation of their progress. They must name the writing skills they have learned and then demonstrate that they have learned them by using examples from their more recent drafts in their portfolios. I ask them to show and tell me how they have most improved as a writer and what evidence there is in that first day and subsequent essays to prove their belief? They identify the writing skills they need to improve. This

exercise tests the level of consciousness that students have about their own writing ability and it is made easier for them because of the contrast that should be apparent between the writing in the first day essay and one of the final drafts that they pull from their portfolios.

Since I never grade or write comments on the first day essay, the students are not led by my direct prompts. Using this self-assessment exercise I have had students talk about paragraph structure and idea development; they have discussed their ability to understand the writing assignment and focus on purpose and unity. They identified problems with audience and faulty logic and I had to feel that be being able to name the problems they had they achieved a better understanding of the challenges of writing and how to avoid their own weakness while using their strengths.

The self-evaluation was not as painful because they were working with concrete material, their own writing. They were also evaluating writing they had done months before,and the distance in time allowed the students' to feel less threatened by their weakness because they were using their previous mistakes to prove their own progress. Students were always motivated to put a great deal of thought into this last assignment in the portfolio because they knew the purpose of it was to argue their readiness for promotion to the next class. All of the evidence to support their case had to come from the examples of their writing in their portfolios.

A final exercise in the portfolio can be to ask students to edit out the papers and determine which writing demonstrates their best work or most representative work. They need to learn what is valuable in their pre-writing and what is not and this portfolio "housekeeping" allows them

to practice this vital skill. This exercise also prepares the portfolio to be carried forward to be used in the students' next composition class or any class that requires writing. Teachers who keep files of their previous handouts, lesson plans, and tests already recognize the value of this type of portfolio building and editing. We should teach this skill to our students as well.

When our students learn that all writing should relate to and build on previous writing, they will understand the value of a well maintained writing portfolio and its impact as a resource for their future writing. Although I may not have a bolt of lightening to teach that lesson to my students the way it was brought home to me, the writing portfolio as a classroom practice for students plants that concept in students' minds.